

May 11, 2006 Norton Says Several Factors Were Key to her Support of D.C. House Vote Bill

Norton Says Two Mark-ups, Increase in House Seats and
Bipartisan Equivalence Were Key to her Support of D.C. House Vote Bill
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Washington, DC—At a news conference, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) and Government Reform Committee Chairman Tom Davis (R-VA) culminated their efforts of almost four years with an announcement of an agreement they reached almost two months ago on the D.C. Fair and Equal House Voting Rights Act of 2006. The bill, which was then shared with the relevant Democratic and Republican Members, is the first with good indicators for passage, including mark-ups in two committees and the required elements, “the essential metric [for] both parties—no partisan gain and no partisan disadvantage,” according to Norton. She said that the pattern of party equivalence was set in the nineteenth century and has been dominant throughout U.S. history, notwithstanding “a democratic right as basic as representation in the legislature that taxes your citizens and sends them to war.”

The Congresswoman said that Davis also had agreed to allow a vote on her bill, the No Taxation Without Representation Act for full voting rights, even though it does not have the votes for passage. She said that vote would be a marker that the District had not given up on achieving equal voting rights in both houses of Congress. Norton said that the vote belonged to District residents and had been driven by their long struggle, but that she “could not deny the personal side of this quest.” She said it would be a special honor to be the first to cast a vote for D.C. on the House floor in memory of a man she never knew, her great grandfather, a slave who ran away from a Virginia slave plantation in the 1850s “in a futile search for freedom itself.”

The Congresswoman’s full statement follows.

Tom Davis and I have worked on many tough bills together and have even gotten a fair number passed. Still, the bill we announce today has surely been the toughest, has required the most work for us both, and has taken the most time. No wonder, because if the bill we call the D.C. Fair and Equal House Voting Rights Act of 2006 is enacted, it will be because after two centuries of struggle by D.C. residents, we have cleared the high hurdle to equal citizenship in the People’s House—the House of Representatives.

The essentials of the agreement we reached almost two months ago are these. First, the D.C. Fair and Equal House Voting Rights Act is a big win for the House itself because quite apart from the District, the Act would mark the first time that two additional seats have been added to the House since 1959, 47 years ago. We believe that our new bill improves on the original version because it raises the chances of passage, with the increase of two seats rather than one.

Second, although no one can ever guarantee passage of a bill, I believed we had to make most of this opportunity—which might not come again soon—including the indispensable ingredient for passage. Therefore, a critical element of what we have achieved is not only the coming mark-up in the Government Reform Committee, but also in the Judiciary Committee, the committee of jurisdiction.

Third, Tom and I have also agreed to a vote first on my bill, the No Taxation Without Representation Act for votes in the House and Senate, followed by a vote on the D.C. Fair and Equal House Voting Rights Act. I do not have the votes for my bill, but I owe that vote on our full citizenship bill to my constituents because they are full citizens. That marker will say that this city has not given up. It will send our continuing message that equal citizenship means what it says—equal representation in both Houses of Congress. However, like home rule, which all D.C. residents embrace today, even though it is incomplete, the House vote is an offer no Washingtonian would refuse after two centuries of service in the armed forces, taxes paid, and every obligation of citizenship met with no vote on the laws that enforce these obligations.

These are the elements that have driven the D.C. Fair and Equal House Voting Rights bill for us. However, our job required that we get our respective parties on board. Therefore, throughout our work on this bill, that began almost four years ago, Tom and I have understood that the essential metric required bringing both parties with us, not only bipartisanship in the usual sense but equivalence, that is no partisan gain and no partisan disadvantage. We have gone through many variations, beginning with Tom’s original proposal, where the D.C. House seat would have included some Maryland residents. Tom then accepted the notion that a D.C. stand-alone seat was better and less controversial all around, and the talks and proposals proceeded. We since have tried several scenarios for moving the bill, for example, a vote in Government Reform on the original Davis bill and a vote on the No Taxation Without Representation Act followed by a mark-up, but a split based on party where few Democrats except me would have voted for Tom’s bill, is the opposite of the only approach that has been successful in American history, and it seemed that if we kept at it, the historical pattern of one Democrat and one Republican seat could take us the whole way. We believe

that our approach has now been vindicated.

Equivalence has been dominant throughout our history. Many remember the most recent major additions of Alaska and Hawaii when these states entered the union because their voting records eliminated party advantage. However, this pattern was set throughout the nineteenth century as each state entered the union, most dramatically, of course, when no slave state could be admitted unless a free state came in at the same time.

Party should not matter when it comes to a democratic right as basic as representation in the legislature that taxes your citizens and sends them to war. However, it is the undeniable reality that party equivalence in one form or another has driven decisions for adding voting representation. Therefore, this bill requires that the Republican state next in line for a congressional seat with the highest number of residents will be paired with the solidly Democratic District of Columbia. Moreover, as a safeguard to reinforce the elimination of partisan advantage, the seat in the Republican state will be at-large.

Finally, I hope I can be forgiven a personal moment. Throughout this process, I have never referred to the District's vote as my vote or what the vote would mean to me personally because it will not belong to me. I have never mentioned the special reason I personally wanted to be the first to cast that vote because this bill is for D.C. residents now and in the future, not for me. However, my 16 years in Congress has been defined by the search for some way to get full representation for the city where my family has lived since before the Civil War. That search has included the two-day debate followed by a vote on statehood more than 10 years ago, and the vote I won in the Committee of the Whole. The struggle has been driven by its own terms, by the here and now. Yet I cannot deny the personal side of this quest, epitomized by my family of native Washingtonians, my father Coleman Holmes, my grandfather, Richard Holmes, who entered the D.C. Fire Department in 1902 and whose picture hangs in my office, a gift from the D.C. Fire Department, but especially my great-grandfather, Richard Holmes, a slave who walked off a Virginia plantation in the 1850s, made it to Washington, and settled our family here. By definition, subliminal motivation is unknown and unfelt. However, when Tom and I knew almost two months ago that we had reached the best agreement we could, I thought openly of my family. I thought especially of the man I never knew. I thought of Richard Holmes, a slave in the District until Lincoln freed the slaves here nine months before the Emancipation Proclamation. I thought of my great grandfather who came here in a furtive search for freedom itself, not the vote on the House floor. I thought of what a man who lived as a slave in the District, and others like him would think if his great-granddaughter became the first to cast the first full vote for the District of Columbia on the House floor. I hope to have the special honor of casting the vote I have sought for 16 years. I want to cast that vote for the residents of this city whom I have had the great privilege of representing and who have fought and have waited for so long. Yes, and I want to cast that vote in memory of my great-grandfather, Richard Holmes.